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NO HELP FOR THE WEARY”: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION
OF FACTORS IMPACTING BURNOUT AMONG DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT ADVOCATES.

by

Elaina Behounek

B.A., University of Tennessee 2007

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Masters of Arts degree.

Department of Sociology in the
Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

“NO HELP FOR THE WEARY.” AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF
FACTORS IMACTING BURNOUT AMONG DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND
SEXUAL ASSAULT ADVOCATES.

By

ELAINA BEHOUNEK

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of (Sociology

Approved by:

Dr. Jennifer Dunn Chair

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Graduate School
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March 21, 2011

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

ELAINA BEHOUNEK, for the MASTER OF ARTS degree in SOCIOLOGY, presented on 03/21/2011, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: “NO HELP FOR THE WEARY.” AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF FACTORS IMPACTING BURNOUT AMONG DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT ADVOCATES.

MAJOR PROFESSOR: DR. JENNIFER DUNN

To examine the factors impacting stress and fatigue in domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff (advocates) a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was performed using ten advocates in a variety of occupations. A multitude of factors were revealed during interviews including individual, organizational and institutional level issues. Personal histories of abuse, working with traumatized populations, low pay and long hours, and collaboration difficulties are themes uncovered during the interview process. Finally, the simultaneous and cumulative affects of stress and fatigue increase feelings of low job satisfaction and ultimately burnout in the advocates interviewed.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research paper to my friends and family, without whom I would never have been able to complete. I also dedicate this paper to all hardworking advocates.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Jennifer Dunn for all her patience and guidance throughout the writing process. I also want to thank Dr. Rachel Whaley for her comments and feedback on the paper. I want to thank Dr. Robert Benford for pushing me to conduct field research. I want to thank Dr. Miller for her feedback on portions of the paper. Most of all I want to thank my friends for not abandoning me when I needed them the most.

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My interest in the subject of burnout in domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff (advocates), stemmed from my own experience working as a court advocate for victims of domestic violence. I quickly realized I could not work in the direct contact role for any great length of time, nor could many of my colleagues. In this paper I examine the cumulative effects of factors that impact stress and fatigue as experienced by the advocates interviewed. Some factors discussed included: personal experience of abuse, the impact of working with traumatized populations, and the impact of organizational and structural factors that increase stress, including being discouraged from disclosing their own experience. Many of the advocates discussed the fatigue contributing to their desire to search for alternate employment or their knowledge they would not last long in this type of occupation, ultimately burning out.

Staff who work with traumatized victims are at increased risk for experiencing compassionate fatigue, vicarious traumatization, and secondary trauma resulting in high burnout rates (Baird and Jenkins 2003, Bride 2007, Clark, Sprang and Whitt-Woosley 2007, Cherniss 1980). I will use the definition of burnout to be a specific occupational stress syndrome occurring when human service professionals become emotionally exhausted, begin to dehumanize their clients, and lose a sense of personal accomplishment at work (Maslach 1982).

There have been several studies about burnout, but a gap exists in examining domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff specifically. Research is needed to uncover the specific experiences that lead to burnout among individuals who work in

these fields. These workers experience stressful working conditions daily. Studies about workload and education levels of agency staff have been performed; however, they have not examined the combined impact of women in subordinated positions' exposure to organizational and structural factors that contribute to stressful work environments.

A startling reality exists. One in three women will experience some form of domestic abuse in their lifetime. One in five women will be the victims of a sexual assault in their lifetime (Domestic Violence Resource Center 2010). Advocates provide support and inform victims of the resources available to help victims cope with violence. Research has shown that advocacy assists victims in accessing available community resources of which they may not have otherwise been aware (Allen, Bybee & Sullivan 2004). Advocacy assistance has been shown to improve the victim's quality of life decreasing their likelihood of revictimization (Bybee and Sullivan 2002). Despite the illustrated efficacy of advocacy programs, those interviewed felt the positions are meagerly compensated and incredibly demanding.

Literature Review

Intimate partner violence is a widespread social problem (Loseke 2001). Existing research suggests that as many as 30 to 54% of women in Western countries will experience at least one episode of physical IPV in their lifetime (Reisenhofer and Seibold 2007). Women are more likely to be the victims of abuse and men the perpetrators. Even with the widespread incidence of violence against women, the term victim has negative stigma. The majority of social workers in the U.S. are women who are not exempt from violence. Their motivation for becoming professionals in the domestic violence or sexual assault field may have stemmed from their violent experiences.

There are negative connotations associated with the label of ‘victim’ as being weak, powerless and helpless (Best 1997). Goffman defines stigma as, “blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior” (Goffman, 1963). Social workers in domestic violence and sexual assault agencies perform identity work to be seen as credible (Hochschild 1979). The rape or domestic violence survivor is defined as a discreditable person because their flaw is not readily visible, but is disclosed to others (Goffman, 1963). Stigma is a label that is socially constructed. Dunn defines social construction as “the ways in which the world is meaningful to us and to how people interpret their experiences and themselves” (2008). Goffman refers to the conflict between the virtual and actual social identities as creating a stigma within the individual (p. 2). Many advocates face an inner conflict of whether or not to disclose to employers their history. This conflict may contribute to feelings of stress and increase the burn out of staff members especially since organizational and structural factors perpetuate a system of patriarchy and hierarchies present barriers to disclosure among domestic staff.

Literature supports the claim that criminal justice systems operate under a hierarchical organizational structure that places men in dominant and women in subordinate occupations. Gender scholars have come to agree that the criminal justice institution has seen participation in larger numbers and for a longer time by men, as judges, lawyers, and jurors (Martin 2002). The concept, men should be the actors and women the supporters, was created based on stereotypical and reinforced ideas that

women are physiologically and psychologically more delicate and less capable of participating in the adversarial world of law (Martin 2002). The institution places a greater emphasis on the gendered characteristics more commonly displayed by men: aggression, lack of emotionality, and high levels of intellectual capacities (Martin 2002). By promoting men to positions of greater power and pay, gender role segregation is perpetuated and accepted in the criminal justice system, with which many domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff collaborate or work within.

According to the U.S. department of labor statistics in 2009 women accounted for 60.3% of workers in community and social service organizations, and 68% of counselors, 79.4% of social workers and 61.4% of miscellaneous and community social service occupations. Women staff an overwhelming majority of social service occupations. These positions are often low paying and highly stressful. These are considered women's occupations due to the necessary levels of emotionality and caring in these positions. On the other hand, women represented 51.9% of the legal occupations in the U.S. in 2009 (US Dept of Labor 2009). While this sounds promising, 74.5% of those are in miscellaneous and legal support worker positions, and 87.7% of paralegals and legal assistants were women in 2009. Conversely, women represent only 34.4% of lawyers (US Dept of Labor 2009). Women are relegated to positions of less prestige and power in the criminal justice system. This can be especially problematic for domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff, mostly women, who face the gendered criminal justice system.

The impact of a male dominated criminal justice system can be problematic for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. The gendered organizations extend

farther than the courthouse. “For example, most police chiefs, sheriffs and uniformed law officers are men; most hospital emergency room (ER) physicians are men, most ER nurses are women, most rape crisis centers (RCC) are all or mostly women organizations; most prosecutors, particularly chief prosecutors are men, most victim-witness-advocates (VWA) are women; and most judges who preside over rape proceedings are men” (Martin 1997). The most powerful roles in organizations belong to men. Practices within organizations create gender segregations.

Hierarchies are gendered because those in higher paid or more highly esteemed positions are placed there because they are “naturally” more suited to responsibility and authority. Those who divide their commitments, the second shift many women face are in lower ranks (Acker 1990). These ideas create organizational structures that perpetuate the “woman as inferior” mentality keeping women clustered in lower paying positions often with little chance of upward mobility because of less responsibility and visibility.

Organizational structure perpetuates gendered notions and ideas of who can perform well in certain occupations (Acker 1992). Positions of power in organizations are connected to images of masculinity including power, ability to lead, and proper displays of emotionality within organizations. Men are the actors, and women the emotional support (Hochschild 1979). This creates the notion that women should be in the caring fields, like domestic violence or sexual assault agencies, rather than acting as a judge, attorney, or as a police officer. Similarly, women's ability to reproduce, menstruate, and their displays of emotionality are used to control and exclude women from upper management positions. The management of emotions required to compete in the workforce conforms and reinforces hierarchies (Acker 1990).

Domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff are forced to navigate the gender segregated criminal justice system in order to effectively perform their duties. As the data illustrates what many advocates conveyed: feeling unsupported, belittled and ostracized as a result of their gender when working with male police officers, ER doctors, judges and lawyers. Advocates have knowledge about the unequal proportions of men and women's roles within the criminal justice system. This knowledge may serve to keep them silent about their own history of abuse.

Previous studies document the prevalence of female victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in the United States, defining it as a social problem. Victims of domestic violence and sexual assault face stigmatizing labels to which many respond by performing identity work in an effort to maintain credible. The literature reviewed revealed a history of institutional gender segregation in the criminal justice system, in hospital emergency rooms, and within rape crisis organizations. By reviewing the literature I noted individual, organizational and institutional level issues facing women. Through qualitative analysis the cumulative and simultaneous impact of the issues can begin to be uncovered. The data collected for the present study support the data previously found.

In this paper I will explore the impact of multiple factors that contribute to burnout among domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff. I draw from in-depth interviews with ten female advocates and relevant literature. I will begin by exploring the prevalence of abuse histories among advocates. Followed by a discussion of whether or not their history is disclosed to their employer. Second, I will examine the impact of specific trauma counseling sessions on feelings of stress. Next, I will discuss

organizational and structural factors that contribute to feelings of stress. Finally, I will examine how these factors simultaneously and cumulatively lead to potential burnout among agency staff.

Data and Methods

My analysis is based on ethnographic research using interview data from seven current and three former domestic violence or sexual assault advocates, one order of protection court date observation data, and several journal entries. The focus of the study is to uncover factors that impact feelings of stress and fatigue which impact burnout, in some cases leading to advocates leaving their occupations. My study includes over ten hours of interview data, a courtroom observation, and journal entries.

Though most of the participants were white females they represented several generations ranging from 26 to over 50 years of age. The participants were recruited from non-profit, county and state level agencies in one Midwestern and one Southern state in North America. Their experience in the domestic violence or sexual assault field ranged from four months to nineteen years. While the advocates were in a wide variety of occupations all subjects worked directly with victims of domestic violence or sexual assault at some time in their careers. Current and former domestic violence and sexual assault advocates over the age of 18 were included. Ten participants were included in the study, three former and seven current domestic violence or sexual assault advocates.

Table 1: Current Advocates

Current Advocates	Years on Job	Age Range
Carrie	19	41+
Debbie	.4	31-40
Evelyn	2.5	31-40
Francine	10	26-30
Greta	6.5	41+
Holly	13	41 +
Janice	10	41 +

Table 2: Former Advocates

Former Advocates	Years on Job	Age Range
Allison	9	26-30
Becky	9	41 +
Ilene	6	26-30

This is an ethnographic study of advocate's experiences of stress and fatigue at work. Despite the diverse sample I interviewed, their experiences were similar and some findings were surprising. I entered the study with personal advocacy experiences and anticipatory answers in mind. I was shocked by some remarks and occurrences described by participants. For example, I expected advocates who consider themselves "survivors" to disclose to employers or colleagues in order to gain credibility. To my surprise, most advocates failed to disclose to their employers. I attempt to understand individual advocates work experiences within the broader societal contexts in which they live. My intent is to analyze social processes and provide a framework for understanding how their experiences can inform existing scholarly knowledge.

Before conducting field research, I submitted and was approved for a Human Subjects Committee (HSC) application. I used a snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. I selected participants from a local and Domestic Violence Rape Crisis

Center (RCC) due to its locality and access. Many of my fellow graduate students and professors' worked closely with the center and had contacts from which I could benefit.

I sent an email to the director of a local RCC. I met with the director to explain my study and my desire to recruit advocates in the center. She invited me to an all-staff meeting to present my study to facilitate recruitment. At the staff meeting I explained the participants would be asked to do an in-depth-interview and keep a journal daily. I passed a sign up sheet around to collect contact information.

I transcribed the interviews personally and coded for common themes. Initially I used open coding looking for important and overlapping themes in the interview transcripts. Next, I selectively coded to highlight the themes that specifically discussed stressors. Finally I theoretically coded where I wrote analytical memos and selected information pertinent to the study.

I informed the participants their names and agency information would be kept confidential and all audio interviews would be kept anonymous. No names were recorded and only I had access to the master contact list. I used pseudonyms for the advocate's names and agency affiliation to maintain confidentiality and minimize backlash for discussing working conditions. The use of past and current advocates allows for some comparison of those who have quit (burnt out) and those who are currently working as domestic violence or sexual assault advocates. The subjects were selected because they were able to offer insight into the day-to-day stressors experienced by domestic violence and sexual assault advocates.

In the next sections I will explore the themes that emerged during my ethnographic fieldwork. The themes discussed include: personal histories of abuse,

insider knowledge, organizational and structural factors that contribute to stress, and feelings of burnout. I have divided the themes into ‘individual’ and ‘organizational and structural’ themes. Within the individual level analysis I include personal histories of abuse, disclosure, and insider knowledge. Within the organizational and structural level of analysis are issues of low pay, on-call shifts, working with traumatized clients, collaboration issues, stress management within organizations, and burn out.

Data Analysis: Individual level

Herstory: Personal Histories of Advocates

Because intimate partner violence is a widespread social problem, it is not surprising that advocates are not exempt from experiencing violence in their own lives. The majority of staff members I interviewed revealed a history of abuse. The violence in their lives ranged from domestic violence experienced by a loved one to a personal experience of molestation as a child.

The women I interviewed offered stories of being affected either directly or indirectly by violence against women. Allison, a white female and former advocate, experienced a situation in her family of domestic violence. She was never victimized personally, but did share the experience of her mother’s abuse leading to the flight of her family from their home to a shelter for victims of domestic violence. This was an eye-opening experience and one that helped her realize the need to help women in crisis. I inquired what life experiences or skills drove her to work in the field of domestic violence and sexual assault. She responded:

When I was 13, I spent a month in a domestic violence shelter, my family did. My dad was really abusive so we

literally left with the clothing on our backs in a car and relocated. I always felt like I needed to give something back because basically I had been given a new life.

The prevalence of domestic violence and sexual assault against women is so widespread it has almost become commonplace for women to experience abuse in their lifetime.

Becky, a former advocate with over nine years of experience commented on her family's history of abuse when she discussed:

My grandmother had also been a battered woman, but I never really knew my grandpa. I could see that in my family, my grandmother suffered multiple strokes, and my grandpa had already been dead for like 5 years and her mind was going back and in the nursing home she was asking the nurses to hide her and keep her safe. I could see the impact it had on her.

Carrie, a supervisor of domestic violence unit at a police department in a large urban area, discussed her history of abuse, her grandmother's, and her daughter's experiences:

I had one experience years ago when I was dating, you know with domestic violence. But I was pretty much raised a feminist and for me it was like ok I'm outta here. I discovered my grandmother started telling me stories about how her father used to beat her mother when she was growing up you know. My daughter, who is now in

her 30's, was actually married to a man about 10 years ago who was violent with her.

Debbie, a 30-year-old white female currently working as a medical legal advocate for victims of sexual assault explained her interest in becoming an advocate for child victims of sexual assault as stemming from her own history: "I was a victim of molestation when I was in seventh grade. That was actually exactly why I only was interested in working with sexually abused children." Her personal experience directly influenced her subsequent advocacy career trajectory.

Evelyn, another medical legal advocate and coworker of Debbie said she did not have any incidents of abuse in her personal history but did have an experience with her best friend:

As soon as the training ended (volunteer training at the RCC), one of my really, my best friend at the time, someone broke into her house and attacked and (sexually) assaulted her. It was really really strange because it was like two weeks after my training had just ended, and it was Halloween.

Everyone I spoke with was affected by domestic violence or sexual assault either directly or indirectly. Evelyn explained an indirect incident that became a motivation for seeking employment in the field after her initial volunteer training concluded.

Greta, a white female in her early twenties, was the supervisor for a rape crisis center. She was in charge of 12 staff members, of which three positions were vacant at

the time of the interview. She seemed resistant to discuss any of her history of abuse with me but did state:

I think that all women have experiences of some sort, of experiencing oppression and sexism, and violence in some way, whether its secondary or directly against them and so, I generally don't talk about my personal experiences. And so, I do have experiences um in my past, those are, definitely personal motivation, but not something I professionally speak about.

All but two of the ten women interviewed personally experienced violence in their lives. All the advocates interviewed had indirect experience (a loved one experienced abuse) with abuse. Whether it be a loved one or a personal experience, the majority of participants spoke of the abuse driving them to work in advocacy, others spoke to the abuse as lending to their feelings of credibility and authority in their positions. Initially I only sought to discover if there was a history of abuse in the advocates. The decision of disclosure seemed to cause distress in many of the advocates. I began to explore the ability or desire of these women to disclose their history to employers and the personal motivations behind their decisions.

To Disclose or Not to Disclose

Even with the widespread incidence of violence against women, the term 'victim' is a word that carries negative associations or stigma. The term victim has negative connotations of being weak, powerless and vulnerable. Domestic violence and sexual assault agency staff (advocates) are susceptible to the same stigma their clients face

(Goffman 1963). Additionally advocates may be at risk for negative appraisals of their work ability due to their history of abuse. Advocates actively engage in emotion management to remain credible to their employer (Hochschild 1979).

Advocates are often expected to forget the stressful, often traumatic experiences they encounter on the job, the moment the workday ends. Advocates are supposed to remain emotionally distant from their clients while maintaining the correct amount of empathy and compassion for their clients. Of the women interviewed many spoke about personal abuse histories. Debbie discussed her fears about disclosing to her employer:

And I think, I think some, I think a lot of people don't think that people would go into this line of work. Because I understand there are a lot of people out there who think we would become too personal, it would trigger too many emotions and it would just they wouldn't be able to separate it. But I understand that viewpoint of it and I think that's also why a lot of people in this field aren't open and their coworkers to their boss that they have been victims. I also feel like since I've only been here four months, I think I will at some point just let my boss know at least (her history of molestation). But I kind of feel like I need to make sure I have worked here a while to make sure I am established. So that by that time they will be like 'well she's already proven she's fine' although its one of those things that comes up it's not really a big deal. But it's

certainly not something I was going to mention during my interview or anything like that. I have that worry in my head. I just have to make sure I establish myself first that I can do the job and then it won't be a big deal.

She explained the fear that her employer would see her as unable to perform in the position effectively because she would be too affected by her history to work with other victims. She discussed the need to prove her ability at work before she would consider disclosing her past. Paradoxically, she actually felt her history contributed to her ability to understand the legal processes victims face when prosecuting offenders.

Another sexual assault crisis worker discussed a call the center received by a friend of hers who experienced a sexual assault during a break and entering, as explained earlier. Due to a miscommunication she was not called to go assist the victim in this instance. However the friend contacted her independently to get support, which she provided. She was a volunteer at the time and when she attempted sign up for another volunteer shift following the incident with her friend she commented, "I came back to sign up for a pager shift and they were like 'take some time.' And you know they don't want you to volunteer if it's too close to what's going on in your own life." The agency did not feel she could perform the necessary duties and would not allow her to volunteer.

Lastly Greta, the supervisor of the RCC, I spoke to discussed her desire to keep her personal history of abuse out of the workplace. When I inquired whether she informed her employer about her personal experiences, she commented, "Um, I have not, I don't feel any obligation to. I am open to somebody, if someone specifically wants to know, um, but I don't think that it lessens or increases my

passion for the field.” Even though she said she did not feel it would impact her work, she failed to disclose abuse to her employer. While I am not suggesting it is necessary or expected to disclose to employers, it is interesting that most advocates did not feel it would be to their advantage or make them more credible to their employers if they discussed their history of abuse.

No one wants to be labeled “victim.” Even among those who are trained not to blame the victim being labeled ‘victim’ is a stigmatizing experience. The advocates I spoke with were reluctant to tell their employers about their abuse history for fear they would be forced to overcome a stigmatizing label and be seen as less effective in their positions. Stigmatized individuals are more often judged by the act, which stigmatized them, rather than other personal characteristics or traits. Becoming discredited by disclosing their past, agency staff members fear being labeled and their work being discredited. The socially constructed label of “survivor” or “victim” is hard to overcome. It takes active effort to be seen as an untainted and whole individual worthy of being labeled as “normal” (Goffman 1963, Dunn 2008). The advocates shared stories of victim blaming by professionals, which serve to heighten their own awareness of negative labels victims face.

Allison, a former advocate, explains the treatment of a young woman at an ER “go-out,” (a pager call for assistance for a victim of sexual assault) by responding police officers who asked the victim, “Why did you go over there in the first place, and why did you wait so long to call the cops?” This is an example

of common victim blaming attitudes. Rather than questioning the attackers actions the victim's choices are interrogated.

It may be more difficult for agency staff to adhere to the definitional elements of 'victim', "she may find that the victim images claims makers produce are unappealing and hard for her to identify with, due to the stigma we presently associate with victims and victimization in contemporary society" (Dunn 2008). The image of the helpless, vulnerable, naïve rape victim does not correspond with the strong feminist ideologies with which most the advocates expressed identification. Becky, another former advocate explained her own encounter with victim blaming attitudes when giving a talk about domestic violence:

I started talking about victim blaming attitudes, because that seemed to be my soapbox, and I kept talking about victim blaming. The next day, somebody called me and was like thank you for doing this thing about victim blaming because I've been a victim of rape and my sister in law was sitting in that audience and she left that day and said you know, she said, I used to blame you, but I won't blame you any more.

Blaming a victim is a way for people to distance themselves from the identity of a victimized person, because if it is her fault there is something I can do different to protect myself (King and Webb 1981).

Francine, a RCC supervisor, explained why she did not disclose information to me, or her employer about her experiences of abuse:

I generally don't talk about my personal experiences.

Because I think often times, just in the position that I am in and with the situations that I am often in, that if I do, if I were to say, you know, here's my survivor story, that it would um, it would, turn people off, or say ok that's why she's doing that. She's just another person whining about what happened to her.

The advocates face an additional stigma of becoming discredited in their positions as advocates. Francine discussed stressors in the workplace. One such stressor was the negative attitudes of some rural community members toward victims of abuse. She explained, "The stigma, that is attached to sexual assault victims exists with anyone, but if you're in a larger town, you can kind of become invisible in the population, but in a smaller town you can't, that doesn't happen." Advocates are incredibly aware, more so than the general public, of the common attitudes regarding victims and this knowledge may increase their desire to fail to disclose their own history.

Victim blaming can be harmful to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. It is especially harmful for those who experience violence personally and enter a position working with other victims. While none of those interviewed actually experienced being discredited by disclosure to employers, most felt it was a legitimate fear, which drove them to fail to expose their own history of abuse. As Holly explained, "Our society is setup so that it is acceptable for a female to be a victim."

Insider Knowledge

Many advocates felt their history lent them knowledge they could otherwise not have gained; a credibility and authenticity in their knowledge about victims lived experiences. Interestingly many of the advocates who spoke of abusive pasts, felt the incidents increased their ability to assist victims. They had an insider knowledge that cannot be learned by going to conferences, reading books, or any other way apart from living the experience. Many of them spoke of feelings of credibility and increased ability to understand and explain the process of becoming a survivor after being victimized. Carrie, a supervisor from the large urban city police department's domestic violence unit, also a survivor, discussed her experience with domestic violence:

I think it (abusive relationship) gave me a better understanding of what they were going through. I do know what the experience is in having someone get violent with you. So, um, it seems like when I was, when I was really doing a lot of domestic violence counseling, that gave me a better understanding of it because I could tell the questions came to me and I could tell from talking with the women that it was a good question. In other words, I could relate to them better. And I saw the recognition in their eyes you know from what I was saying. I think if I never had the experience I would have been clueless about what to say, about what to ask.

Carrie spoke of her deepened ability to ask meaningful questions of her clients due to her own history. Their experiences allowed them a level of insider knowledge that they saw as a valuable asset when assisting clients who have lived through similar experiences.

Debbie discussed how her own difficult time navigating the legal process as a seventh grader, increased her desire to work with victims in order to make the legal process less intimidating for her own clients:

I did go through all the crazy legal stuff and so and how terrifying that was and just like thinking it shouldn't be this way. I remember how terrifying the legal process was to me and I remember thinking like when everything came out and everything, oh my god I am gonna have to be like testifying in court in like a month! Its like you just don't know cause the way movies, it looks like you just go to trial and everything just happens quickly. And so that was actually exactly why the only reason why I ever pursued social work, that was why I only was interested in working with sexually abused children.

Debbie's familiarity with the legal system helped her understand the anxiety many victims face when navigating the complicated prosecution process. Evelyn discussed her feelings of understanding victim's narratives better due to her own history:

Because there's just that, kind of worry about it. But I think that's a misguided belief because I think, not that actual victims make better social workers, or better advocates,

um, you have you have a unique perspective you can bring as long as you don't really bring your personal experience into your professional life. But it's there, it's um, you probably have compassion in a slightly different ways for victims about their anxiety and just their confusion of everything. And so, you know, I just, think that there's worry out there. And I think a lot of people are closed about that they are actual victims themselves.

She discussed having "compassion in a different way," these are experiences that no training can offer, only through the lived experience can one come to understand the situations many of their clients face. Francine discussed her history of abuse as lending to her ability to understand the circumstances many victims face after an abusive incident being a "personal motivation" for her entering the sexual assault field. Despite being motivated and driven to work with sexual assault survivors through her personal experiences, both Francine and Debbie felt the need to hide their history and manage their identities in the workplace.

Individual level issues faced by the advocates create stressful working conditions that contribute to feelings of fatigue. Personal histories of abuse were common and expected among the advocates. Surprisingly many advocates felt a level of authenticity due to their survivor status. However, they feared negative reprisals by employers and failed to disclose their histories. Individual level factors are not solely responsible for the stress and fatigue experienced by advocates, there are larger organizational and structural issues involved.

Organizational and structural considerations

There were six themes that emerged when asking advocates what specific organizational procedures, or lack of, resulted in lowered job satisfaction. The first and most consistent theme discussed by advocates was low pay, followed by sporadic work hours, working with traumatized clients, collaboration difficulties, inability for workplace to help alleviate stress, and feelings of burnout by advocates.

Working Hard for no Money

Becky, who worked in the field as a paid advocate for nine years and now volunteer's, explained why she no longer wants to work directly with victims:

It sounds really cold to say it, pay and time. Um, just because I have a partner and two kids and I wasn't to send (my daughter) to college, I want to see her. The way I used to work you know I just worked round the clock, and you work a lot for you know, little financial reward, you don't get a lot of promotional rewards were I worked. I want to have a normal life. You know, I mean, we have kids. I want to be able to have normal hours, I want to have breaks.

Evelyn, who has been on the job for four months, discussed her rate of pay:

All of us make \$12.00 an hour. Yeah, and every time I am on call, and I hate being on call, I just remind myself \$12.00 an hour. I mean we have benefits but (laughs) \$12.00 an hour. And I recently found out, they don't' up it

as you're here longer (laughs) that's what it stays. Yup,
let's rock and roll. So nobody is here for the money.

Evelyn, who worked at the agency for 2 ½ years, as a medical legal advocate explained why she did not think she would work as an advocate for a lot longer, "I need to make more money, I can't live for so long on this salary." She said pay was one of the biggest stressors at her workplace.

Francine commented on high attrition rates among advocates:

I don't know that its always burnout is the reason why
people leave. One thing is very significant is the low pay
that we offer our staff. Um, which is not, out of line with
other social service agencies or with other rape crisis
centers in the region, but it still, difficult for people if their
wanting to work in this field, because we do have very high
standards for our staff, educationally, with experience, and
all of those areas, so its very unfortunate.

All of those interviewed had at least a Bachelors degree, one had a Jurist Doctorate, two had Master's degrees and were working on PhD's, and one has a Master's degree. As the supervisor explained, the agencies have high expectations for education and work experience, but their pay rate is incredibly low.

Beep Beep

One of the most consistent themes that emerged during my research project was the on-call nature of the sexual assault advocates work. At one agency two advocates and one volunteer shared the pager shift responsibility. One advocate worked Monday through

Wednesday and the other Thursday through Saturday. A volunteer took the pager on weekends. Someone from the agency is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, alternating among advocates and volunteers. Due to the unpredictable nature of sexual assault, it can occur anytime of day and in any of the seven counties the agency covers, a pager is necessary.

The on-call shift is an incredibly stressful part of the job because an advocate can be called to duty at any time. All those interviewed who experienced the pager shifts expressed stress and anxiety about the “go-out” (responding to pager call to go to assist a victim at an emergency room-ER). The agency from which many participants were recruited, covers a large geographic call area, seven counties, which creates a long time commitment to reach the outlying counties. Allison, a former advocate commented on her pager shift:

Then there was one time when I was on call for a weekend;
I got four go-outs in 3 days. And I was insane; I was like an
emotional wreck by the end of it. I um, I wasn't sleeping,
because I had a go out for like 8 hours at a time.

Carrie commented on the nature of the pager calls for ER visits, “Well, its stressful only because you're in the middle of doing something and you get paged and you have to drop everything and go to the hospital.” Many advocates commented on the intrusion and disruption the pager caused in their lives. Evelyn commented in her journal entry:

My pager went of at 3:00 a.m. for a go-out at an ER. I had
only gone to bed an hour before. I was sleeping so nicely
and my pager going off sucked! I hate the stunned, grouchy

feeling. It's awful. So, I got dressed, washed my face to wake up more and headed out.

Working on one hour of sleep caused her to feel fatigued and groggy. She had another experience, which she wrote about in her journal:

I got home at 4 pm today and was in desperate need of a nap. I had only laid down for one minute when my pager went off. Noooooo! I HATE the on-call part of the job! It was a go-out to an ER. It was a 30-minute drive to get there. Most go-outs average 4-6 hours. So, I was looking at my watch calculating that I may not get home until 10 pm. When I got to the ER and checked in at the front desk, the nurse informed me the client had just left and declined services. The nurse pointed the victim out and the victim was right outside the ER door. I went outside and introduced myself to the victim. However the victim declined any of my services. So, the whole thing was strange, but all I could think about was how happy I was I could go home and that the go-out fizzled out. Thank God!

This experience suggests that, if an advocate is happy when a victim refuses services they are being overworked. The pager is a part of the job few other occupations require. In these narratives, job satisfaction is clearly low. Most advocates commented on being paged at 3 a.m. indicating they were often called in the middle of the night. The

advocates expressed a loathing for the pager and an interruption from their sleep and home lives due to the pager.

Traumatized Clients

Work with traumatized clients comes with the additional burden of risking vicarious traumatization through listening to stories of violence and viewing the aftermath of violent incidents. I will be using the term vicarious trauma to explain those specific counseling sessions where the advocate cannot forget the experience and will have memories for a long time about the experiences. All advocates I spoke to experienced sessions they would not soon forget. I will highlight a few to illustrate the impact of working with a population that has experienced trauma. The first is a story relayed by Becky is a case that occurred in 1987, 12 years before this interview:

I remember the first case I worked in rape crisis was a case of three little kids who were sexually abused by a stepfather, which was really bad, so that stuck with me because they were so small. So we went to the hospital and we were staying with them and they were doing the exams (rape kits) and all that stuff and it was just mind boggling, I mean they were small, I mean the oldest was like a five year old boy, it was like a three year old and a two year old.

Carrie commented on a case she remembers vividly:

It was just a really tricky, you know, just the really traumatic ones, um they stick with me a little bit. We've had, we had a case one time were a guy broke into a home

and killed his ex-wife and her mother and there were six children of various ages in the home at the time, and the children were there in the house with their mother and their grandmother dead for a couple hours before the police were called and all that.

When I asked the Evelyn if she recalled any cases that seemed particularly traumatic she said:

One that we had that is probably the case that sticks out the most to me and uh it was a guy who um was trying to get people to um it was right before Christmas. Like if they wanted to make some extra cash the week before Christmas, and put a thing on craigslist for someone to just clean his house for a day. This person (victim) who had a young kid who wanted to get an extra toy for them for Christmas saw the ad and um, responded to it and when she got there he fixed her coffee in the morning and she had some of the coffee and woke up at four in the afternoon. So he had put something in there (the coffee). It was a horrible case because she had been very badly assaulted sexually assaulted.

Evelyn recalled a most horrific story of a client she worked with:

Her husband would do this Russian roulette thing with her, and so there was a bullet in the gun and he would put it to her head and pull the trigger. And at first she would scream and freak out, over time she didn't get upset anymore.

What he did is he sexually assaulted her with the gun. And so it was a big metal gun with the site thing and so she was all torn up on the inside. She had a lot of money so she bought a car from a friend, and she started driving, and she drove, and drove and drove, about 1,000 miles away from where she was. And so she ended up in (county name) and she couldn't drive anymore cause she was bleeding, weak... She would not go to the hospital because she didn't want her husband to find her... (She finally decided to go to the ER) She was screaming when they were putting the speculum in and he said he was barely touching the area. She was just screaming out in pain.

She explained the impact this case had on her: "I was all she had in the world at that moment. So it was really, I felt traumatized when it was over. I felt like, 'what just happened to me?' you know like something happened *to* me." These narratives illustrate the impact of working with traumatized individuals whereby the violent incidents come to be internalized and felt by the advocate, creating vicarious traumatization. This is one of the unavoidable negative effects of doing this type of work.

The Collaboration Conundrum: Can't We All Just Get Along?

Another factor revealed through interviews which impacted job satisfaction and negative feelings for many advocates, was interactions with male police officers, ER doctors, judges and lawyers. Many interactions where collaboration was necessary left advocates with negative feelings. Not only are advocates faced with low pay and sporadic hours, they are often met with hostile collaborators. The majority of advocates are women therefore the advocates face the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of the criminal justice system while trying to assist victims of violence.

Allison commented on the importance of victim advocates presence at emergency rooms, "You have to be a voice for them (victims) when at times like the nurses don't care, I mean the nurses have their own agenda, the doctors have their own agenda, and sometimes the police have their own agenda." She went on to explain another incident with a victim who did not understand the words a doctor was using resulting in accusations of lying by the doctor. Allison said the doctor:

Treated her like a piece of trash. The doctor chastised her and the police were giving her a hard time and she's not sure if she wants to press charges and you know everyone wants her to perform a certain way or to answer certain questions. The way the doctors and cops are its like no wonder people don't report a sexual assault I mean I wouldn't report it.

The sexual assault advocates who respond to the pager on “go-out’s” to hospitals discussed collaboration difficulties. Evelyn commented on the attitudes of nurse’s in ER’s:

Nurses, cause a lot of times, a lot of times, hospitals don’t call us like they are supposed to and I think a lot of it is they don’t want to wait for us to get there and they don’t want us in the way. And we did 2 training sessions recently on the rape kits to nurses in (rural community) hospital. It was awkward because you could tell the nurses are like, you know, because we are not nurses! It was awkward in the room; I mean you could just sense it. You could sense that they were like whatever.

Negative treatment by nurses was a consistent theme, which creates a hostile environment for women who are in a state of turmoil and distress. I asked Evelyn whether she felt her interactions would be different if she were a male in the criminal justice system, she replied:

Definitely, definitely. I have had one female judge the whole time; I’ve been here (2 ½ years). A couple female attorneys but mostly they were all male. I think I would be looked at differently (if she were male), you know, its like a man walks in the door, there is respect that goes with that, where as we have to earn that. It reminds me of when you were a kid, and you played baseball, you had to hit the ball

twice as far so they would let you play, you know. And if you fall down, they are like, go play with the girls. So it's the same thing in the courtroom, everywhere you go.

I then asked her about courtroom dynamics she replied:

Right, we ingratiate ourselves to them (male lawyers). I am the advocate, I need to be assertive, but the last thing I want to do is you know, piss that guy off. I am going to have to negotiate my femininity. You know, where as if I were a man, I could just say, hey listen it needs to be done this way. It's just different. 'Do you think we should do it this way,' (as if asking male attorney how to perform a legal procedure) and I know what I am doing. We have to do it carefully (speak up if something is being done incorrectly), especially with the cops, judges and lawyers. Because they don't value it, they don't see it as a profession that you know. I don't know, they don't value it.

Janice, an advocate at a Sherriff's department commented on the variation in attitudes between male and female officers, she commented:

We just have two female deputies. It is just their compassion is so much more, and it's genuine. Officers I work with pisses me off more than anything. Male officers that you absolutely can tell in their reports and in follow up

conversations they were nothing but bothered by the call (domestic violence or sexual assault call). More than not we have the 'you're a pain in my ass, I don't really want to mess with you'. And it's aggravating. I don't know that you can learn compassion. I think some of our officers are just arrogant sons of bitches! There is a huge gender gap in law enforcement.

Ilene, former volunteer for more than six years discussed her strategies for dealing with male officers:

I know when to kiss up and when to flirt to get what we need and I know when to be direct. We are all dealing with a patriarchal system where there are these older men who are in a room with a young female survivor telling her what to do and I show up, just another woman, not in uniform and they get a little offended when I start doing things so they can't just lord their power over her. Of course they get upset. There are times when we have to play the game, but let's acknowledge how crappy the game is.

Women make up the majority of social workers in the U.S. When they are met with the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the criminal justice system, which inhibits their ability to effectively advocate for and assist their clients. The advocates expressed their frustration with navigating the male dominated criminal justice system. Often, they felt

their opinions were undermined and undervalued. They even expressed feeling unwanted and unnecessary in criminal justice proceedings as a result of off-putting interactions with attorneys, judges and police officers.

No Help for the Weary

I inquired whether the organization or agency that employed them assisted in alleviation of stress from working with a traumatized population. Most advocates said there was little, if anything done to help with the stress. The majority stated it was up to individual workers to help each other deal with problems and issues. Becky noted:

We would just go out and blow off; you know sometimes you just have to. Just to deal with it, because you go try to tell somebody else what you just say and they are like ‘whoa don’t tell me about this. It was pretty much up to us advocates on our own.

She mirrored a common response by advocates. Due to confidentiality there are few people who can be included in discussions about counseling sessions or ER visits with clients. When I asked Debbie what the organization did to help combat feelings of stress she said:

We can’t really go home and talk to a boyfriend or friend. We can’t so your really limited to just being able to talk to your boss or coworkers and a lot of times you don’t really want to talk to your boss because you don’t want them to think you cannot handle the job well. You kind of want to

keep this façade up, you know, like not everything is fine.

It's really just your coworkers that you can talk to.

Though the agency is aware that the population they work with can have incredibly difficult and traumatic experiences, Debbie explained feeling fearful to discuss job related issues because advocates will be seen as unable to cope with working conditions and feared negative valuations of their performance. Evelyn, a medical legal advocate of 2 ½ years commented on an incident with an incredibly traumatic “go-out”, explained above (Russian Roulette), after which she called her supervisor to ask for support:

So I called my boss. And I was telling her what happened.

And I was basically I said the worst thing is I am still on call, in no condition to go on a go-out. She kind of hemmed and hawed and said, ‘well if there is anything I can do just give me a call.’ And she got off the phone, I was like, ‘take the pager!’ You know what I mean, I need, I have to sleep, I can’t I was I seriously if I had gotten another go-out I don’t think I would have done it. I never felt like that in my life, so exhausted. You know it was like, more than 48 hours I didn’t sleep. It was so emotional, and so stressful. I just needed to sleep but I couldn’t cause the pager is there and I needed to be ready in case something happened.

She went on to explain that she felt abandoned by her supervisor and felt isolated and vulnerable. She was the solitary advocate who did not fear reprisal and asked for help,

only to be offered no support. This is a great example of why many advocates rely on coworkers to disclose their feelings and troubling experiences rather than supervisors. The condition of employment that offered the most stress is the “go-out’s” on pager shifts.

I Quit!

Working with traumatized clients is hard enough, coupled with struggling to define your own victimization, low pay, long hours, pager shifts, and collaboration difficulties domestic violence and sexual assault agencies experience low job satisfaction, burnout and high attrition of advocates. When I asked Carrie if her employees are overworked she simply stated, “Yeah.” Debbie discussed her feelings about burnout:

You want to talk about burnout rate that is the part that is going to burn me out of the job quicker than anything else. It’s just grueling. Cause its like every week, Wednesday and Thursday nights, like, you know, I like stay awake until 1:00 a.m. because most likely something will happen before one am. And even then like it kinda, it’s just you don’t sleep very well so you loose a lot of sleep and you can’t you can’t get away from work. Cause like in this line of work they are always talking about how its important to um, get you know get away from your job and leave your job at five at night because it is a very stressful job and jus the stuff that you see and you just need to unwind and have your personal time, so when we have to be on call, we

don't, we don't' get to do that. It's just a really crappy part of the job.

She shared a more immediate experience of pager life when she journaled about a go-out:

It was actually a short go-out. I was back home by 5:30 am, which is unheard of. Of course, I can't just go right back to bed once I get back from something like that. So I was up until 6:30 am filling out all the paperwork from the go-out. I went back to bed at 6:30 am, only to have to wake up at 8 am and head out for a staff meeting. I also had to do stuff for work all afternoon, so I didn't get much of a chance to flex my time due to the go-out. I was completely exhausted when I finally got home. And they wonder why people burnout with this job!

When I asked her if she has thought about quitting she explained:

I am very aware of two things. One thing I know that the on call part is gonna be what ends up burning me out of this job before anything else. It's not gonna be the clients, it's not gonna be working for a non-profit, it's not gonna be the money, it's gonna be the on call part that's gonna do it. And then second of all pretty much, king of the average for anybody who works at any job but especially the kind of job I'm in is like two to three years. And so I'm like also

very aware of that too. Very few people in the position I'm in have lasted more than three years.

Evelyn, Debbie's senior colleague commented on the turnover rate. When I mentioned she had been working with the company for 2 ½ years she said, "It's sad when 2 ½ years is a long time. A high turnover." She also said, "I am probably not gonna work here for too much longer. But I don't know, I don't have any plans of moving or switching jobs. But it's not a job I want to keep for a really long time". The issue of attrition seemed to be expected and normal for agencies that work with victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. No solutions were offered.

Ilene, a volunteer with six years of experience working with sexual assault victims recently quit her position due to organizational difficulties. She discussed several times when she encountered traumatic "go-out's" and did not receive the desired level of support from administration. She said, "continuity of care" of volunteers causes many of them to leave at the same time, a concept she called a "mass exodus":

I know in terms of the continuity of care of volunteers there has been an issue with turnover. I have been there longer than anybody else in RCC. There is a problem with continuity of information, of mission, ideology, especially because a lot of times turnover happens all at once. I think sometimes things reach a boiling point, from what I hear from staff. They've all had these grumbles and issues and nothing is getting addressed and they are getting dumped on. Recently I have heard from staff they are not being able

to strongly act on the mission and ideology that they had and being told to tone things down and professionalize things. To be professional. I think when you do this kind of work, when you do find your support with others who are there, so once one or two leave you are not nearly as committed to staying, so it is probably going to be a snowball effect. Especially if those are people you have been griping to about the management style or whatever and they leave you are like, wow if they did it so can I.

Ilene echoed a common response by advocates, the agency does not offer a shoulder for support when it is needed. This sometimes results in negative feelings and advocates may leave the agency. She went on to discuss how turnover in management can affect the interactions between staff and administration. In the following statement Ilene is explaining how she used to have a supportive boss who knew her strengths and could support her because she knew her personally:

But because of the turnover there is no one that knows that. I tried to point this out to the RCC supervisor, I said, “You don’t even know what my strengths are, you don’t even know all that I know. All the experience I bring to the situation and how I am making my decision and how I am good at making those decisions”... You need someone who is going to advocate for you and be your cheerleader and be your support person who you can trust and go to and say ‘I

know that you know that you are really good at what you do so I am going to trust that you made the best decision at the time. There needs to be a sense that the top person is someone you can go and crash on their couch and tell them what's going on.

In a position with meager compensation, long hours, little respect and workplace support, burnout is a possible and likely outcome. Job satisfaction will not likely be sustained when advocates face the combined affects of multiple occupational stressors.

Conclusion and Discussion

Domestic violence and sexual assault are widespread social problems. Out of the ten advocates interviewed for the project, all of them had direct or indirectly been affected by domestic violence or sexual assault. The majority of staff members interviewed revealed a history of abuse. The abuse ranged from domestic violence experienced by a loved one to self disclosed molestation as a child.

Each person discussed the identity work and inner conflict about whether to disclose or not to their employer their history of abuse. Of those who were victims of abuse, fear of being labeled a 'victim' and their work suffering as a result, kept many from disclosing their abuse to employers. Despite the authenticity they felt their abuse lent them, they feared employers and colleagues would see them as unable to perform effectively in their positions due to personal trauma. Even though employers are aware that one in three women will be victims of domestic violence and one in four sexual assault, advocates feared their employers would not see them as effective.

Emotion management is a necessary skill for advocates. If they get too close to their clients or let their own history become a part of their work, they are discredited (Goffman 1963). But, is it possible to ignore feelings or manage our emotions? Is it healthy? Is it necessary? Advocates feel like their experiences make them better able to understand the victim's narratives. So why do they have to hide their history from their employers, coworkers, and clients?

At all four agencies from which I recruited participants, none had male advocates. The role of advocate is seen as a caring position, and is primarily filled with women. The institution of work has historically placed women in positions of lower esteem and women in these positions are often compensated at lower rates of pay and prestige than men. This is true of the advocates interviewed. All advocates interviewed complained of working long, undesirable hours, and being paid very low wages. I realize it is necessary for immediate assistance of victims for advocates to carry a pager, but there should be more support when an advocate is feeling raw or overwhelmed by an experience. They are also forced to work with a population of individuals who are extremely traumatized, which causes them to also experience trauma. The advocates often work with victims immediately after a violent episode sometimes causing vicarious traumatization for the advocates.

Most advocates interviewed discussed lack of agency support when they asked for assistance following a traumatic incident. Another finding in my study suggests the institutional occupational segregation of the criminal justice system creates another stressful factor for advocates. The majority of professionals the advocates interact with

are men. Many advocates discussed feeling as if men did not value their position and role in the legal process, some treated them with little or no respect, making their job difficult.

These findings indicate there are many stressors that can contribute to fatigue, decreased job satisfaction and ultimately burnout in domestic violence and sexual assault advocates. These are not inclusive or exhaustive measures but do help to examine the lived experiences of agency staff and its affects on stress levels. The findings are not generalizable beyond the staff I spoke to but may help agencies to uncover some stressors they may be unaware of in order to create procedures to alleviate some stress. Through sampling a diverse group of advocates with varying levels of experience I feel the findings contribute to understanding the experiences of female advocates who navigate a male dominated criminal justice system.

Turn over and burnout are significant because they affect individual advocates, agencies, the communities and victims in which they serve. The advocates are affected in multiple ways and the end result can mean they do not fully meet the needs of their clients because they quit before their case is resolved or they lack compassion necessary to assist effectively. The agencies have to train and retrain advocates, which is costly and time consuming. Many agencies are funded through federal, state, or county grants. The community suffers because without advocates to assist victims in their healing they may fail to report or end up back in a harmful relationship causing them to require additional services, a cost the community will bear. The victims may feel a sense of marginality because their advocate has left and they did not receive a consistent level of care.

These are not the only stressors advocates face but it is a beginning to investigating the lives of agency staff. I would like to recruit a larger sample size to

gather a more diverse data set. I would also like to interview employers to examine their thoughts about victims working as advocates. Finally, it would be of interest to employers to institute a program to facilitate stress reduction in employees to combat fatigue, which decreases job satisfaction and can lead to burnout. I believe creating a weekly support group for advocates to discuss any stressful workdays would increase positive feelings and decrease burnout.

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